Prairie Comment Program

From C.J.C.A. Edmonton to Western Net.

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"F O L K L O R E I S T H E R E Y O U F I N D I T"

Script by Della Foss.

OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT.

When we look back to the days of our forefathers ... or whatever we feel like calling them ... I wonder if most of us don't picture them as prim old gentlemen in cutaway coats ... usually sporting a beard or handlebar moustache? Just remember photographs taken in the nineties, and you'll know what I mean. Or, if we remember our pioneer background, we're likely to have a mental picture of grim frontier days where life was mostly struggle and danger. I know that's the way I usually thought of it... that is, until I took a glimpse into the realm of western Canadian folklore.

Last week, I was lucky enough to have Robert Gard of the University of Alberta's Extension Department here in the studio, and he explained that he is visiting Alberta for a year to collect its folklore and local history. At first, I was pretty skeptical over the idea that a country as young as this could have any folklore. To me, folklore was something to associate with older countries ... especially countries like Hungary or Poland. I thought it concerned only gipsies or peasants and meant sitting around a campfire telling old stories which had passed from generation to generation ... and singing old ballads.

Mr. Gard tells me my ideas on the subject were very narrow, and after talking to him awhile, I'm afraid I agree with him. It seems we have a fine interesting body of folklore here ... which immediately raises two

questions ... What is it? and where did we get it from?

Now, first— what *is* folklore? That's a rather hard one to answer because even the scholars haven't definitely made up their minds about it. But, the general idea seems to be that it's a type of learning unrelated to education. It's something that belongs to the *people* of a country ... their tales, rhymes, songs, proverbs, beliefs ... even their customs.

In Alberta, the folklore includes comments on the weather, and the land ... tall tales, Indian legends, tales of the pioneers, and probably a host of other things I haven't mentioned. A great many national groups have moved into this part of the world, and each group has brought with it some folklore from the old world. We have settlements of Ukranians, Hutterites, Poles ... as well as Scottish folk, the Irish, Welsh, English, French Canadian, and still others. A lot of the folklore imported into the country in this way is changed to suit its new environment.

A Ukranian girl-friend of mine was telling me about a proverb her grandmother used to threaten her with. Translated, it went something like this: "Saint Marie frowns on and disowns all bad girls who whistle." There's not much rhyme left in that, but that's the idea, anyway. And I imagine you've heard our English version of the same thing. I know I heard it from my grandmother quite often when I was a youngster....

"A whistling girl and a crowing hen
Always come to some bad end."

I don't know if there's any connection between the two or not, but I can't help wondering.

To get on with the whys and wherefores of our folklore ... I mentioned that the different groups coming into the country brought their own stories and often these were changed to meet the new environment. Mr. Card was surprised

by one example of this. Down in New York State the people tell a tall story about Keuka Lake which is shallow and freezes awfully fast. Here in Alberta he found the same story ... only dressed up in slightly different style.

Here, the story was about a farmer whose crop failed to grow because of too much rain; his fields were simply drowned out. Then just to make matters worse, there was a plague of frogs. Finally winter came, very suddenly; frost started to harden all the sloughs all over his land ... and just at that minute all the frogs leaped into the water and were frozen solid with their hind legs in the air. So, the farmer took out his lawnmower and cut himself ten bushels of frog legs to the acre, and lived like a king all through the winter.

Isolation, or lack of it, has a great deal to do with the folklore of any region. Our Peace River Country has always seemed separate from the rest of the Province ... rather on its own. I know if you lived there, you spoke of a trip to Edmonton or Calgary, for example, as a "trip outside". As a result of this, Mr. Gard says the Peace River Country is developing characteristics and folkways of its own.

Pride in the land has an effect on the stories of a region, too. You'll remember the days twenty or twenty-five years ago when the Peace River Country was being opened up? Advertisements in papers all over Canada pictured it as a paradise for settlers ... and the Peace River old timers naturally boosted the idea.

Well, they tell a story about a member of an Board of Trade from Eastern Canada who asked Mr. Campbell Young about the Peace River climate. ...Mr. Young, by the way, was a pioneer and trader in the north. ... Anyway, Mr. Young thought it over and finally said: "Well, sir, I'm going to tell you something to illustrate just how healthy this climate really is. When the first settlers came up here, they were lonely— they had nothing— not

even a cemetery. They got to figuring that one thing they would need would be a cemetery so they got together and fixed up a fine plot for one. Then they sat around and waited for someone to die. But nobody died. So then, they sent for all their oldest relatives and friends— but nobody still died— In fact, those old folks seemed to be getting younger. It was a terrible situation. The undertaker almost starved to death; finally he packed up and went to Saskatchewan, and he passed away there. In the end, do you know what we had to do to get somebody in that cemetery? We got so desperate we had to shoot a man ... which really shows you just how healthy this climate is!"

Now there's a story that's native to its own region. Geography and a pioneer's sense of humor created it. The same two factors contributed greatly to much of our folklore... and make it different from the folklore of, say, Eastern Canada and the Maritimes. Western folklore is still in a formative state ... it still has a restless, pioneering quality about it.

Our history makes our folklore different, too. For instance, the red-coated Mounted Police belong to the West, and there are a lot of stories about them. Also, we've stories about the buffalo, the whisky traders of early days, the Hudson's Bay Company, and Indian legends. All these things belong to just the west and our folk tales tell about them. A great many folk tales were born around campfires back in the days when there wasn't much time or opportunity for any other kind of entertainment.

The weather adds the final touch to making our folklore individual... the weather, and perhaps I ought to add, animals and insects, too. I'm sure everybody's heard mosquito stories, and bear stories. Also stories about our terrific cold, and our Chinook winds. I believe the Chinook comes in for most attention. One of the funniest and most ridiculous stories I've heard is about a chinook.

This particular chinook blew into Morley .. in the foothills .. away

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back in the early days when Morley wasn't much but an Indian mission. One Sunday, the Indians came to church as usual and found the snow so deep nothing but the church steeple was showing. This was a fine predicament, but the Indians simply tethered their horses to the steeple, tunneled their way down through the snow and went inside the church. Well— while the service was going on, a nice, warm chinook started blowing through the mountain pass. No one noticed, but when they got outside after the service, all the snow had vanished, and there were the horses still tethered to the steeple, dangling up in the air!

The old timers are still spinning tall tales ... and these modern ones offer a curious mixture of old and new. Here's one from Brooks, down in the ranching section of the country ... and it brings in telephones and cigarette lighters to show it's new, but in other ways it might be as old as the West, itself.

This one is about a wind... and I'm going to try to tell it in the old-timer's own words. "One day," he said, "when we were on the roundup a heck of a wind started to blow. I knew it was going to be a humdinger, so I picked out the biggest beef I could see and slung it back of my saddle to weigh down my horse and keep us from being blowed away. The other boys saw what I was doing and did the same. Well— the wind blew— It blew so hard and so cold, we all got pneumonia, and all them other fellows kicked off, one by one, till I was the only one around. ...It was a fright. The wind just kept blowing. Barns, houses, chickens, fences, and all kind of things kept blowing past. But the funniest thing was an old fellow 'a-sittin' in a rocking chair, sailing along through the air. When he got near me, he hollered for a match, but by the time I'd dug through six inches of sand in my jeans, he'd sailed out of sight. Just then, a telephone blew by, so I grabbed it and 'phoned central in the next township. I told her an old fellow in a rocking chair was headed that way and would she see somebody had a light ready for this pipe.

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"Well— the storm finally blew itself out, so I rounded up the ten thousand head of cattle that's drifted more than a hundred miles. Then I went home to the ranch. First thing I saw there was a big straw hat lying on the ground, so I picked it up. And there was my old friend, still sittin' in his rocking chair, puffing away at his pipe. 'Oh', I said, 'so you found a match.' 'No', said the old fellow, 'they gave me one of them new-fangled cigarette lighters. It's fine for lighting a pipe, but it ain't so good for picking your teeth';"

Naturally, the Indian legends are much older than any of the stories of the old timers. Some of them are on the magnificent side— a little awe-inspiring and beautiful. One of the finest, I think, is the Stoney Indian legend about Lake Louise at Banff.

When the world was very young, so the legend goes, giants peopled the earth. A certain giant chief, who was a very famous hunter, was never satisfied with the number of animals he could kill with his traps or arrows. Then one day he saw a rainbow in the sky. The more he watched it, the more he wanted it. He thought it would make a magic bow. Finally, climbing the tallest tree on earth, he tore the rainbow from the sky. But when he touched it, the colors melted. In sudden anger, the giant dashed the rainbow against the nearest rocky peak, and it fell shattered to the bottom of the nearest lake. The gods of the elements then made another arch to hold up the sky when it rained. But the colors of the shattered rainbow are still seen spreading through the waters of what is now called Lake Louise.

It's easy to see, isn't it, why a legend like this could only belong to the Rockies and lovely Lake Louise.

Finally, we come to a place where folklore and local history overlap each other ... and you can't quite say where one stops and the other starts. We find a good example of this in the story of the Lost Lemon Gold Mine.

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To begin with, back in the spring of 1870, a man named Lemon, and his partner went prospecting in the foothills of the Rockies. They found gold ... or at least, there was supposed to be gold. The story is all mystery and tragedy. On the night of the discovery, Lemon murdered his partner. Two Stoney Indians witnessed the crime ... and during the long night that followed, they stayed in the darkness outside the campfire, chanting.

Lemon went completely out of his mind ... saddled his horse and rode back to Fort Benton in Montana ... babbling the story of gold and murder to a priest there.

That started the search for the lost gold mine.

By the following spring, Lemon seemed almost sane again, so the priest organized a party and Lemon led them North. But... when they were just a few miles from the place, his mind cracked again, and in the end, the party had to return to Fort Benton. Lemon never regained his sanity ... and the two Indians who'd seen the murder had been sworn to silence by their chief.

But, one of the Indians was finally bribed to tell. It was years later, and Lafayette French, a prospector and trader, set out to find the mine. Everything was fine till the night before they were supposed to start. Then the Indian died. But Lafayette French carried on his search alone. Finally, he wrote to a friend in High River that he'd found it... that he was on his way to tell his friend the whole story.

Then tragedy struck again. At a stopping house along the way, French was burned to death. In the ashes of the fire, near where he'd slept was found a charred bag containing fourteen thousand dollars in gold nuggets. At High River, they believe this was gold from the Lemon Mine ... but if French knew the secret it died with him.

Old Stoney Indians believe that anyone finding out the secret of the Lemon Gold Mine meets death as a result. They really believe this and literally freeze up when the name is even mentioned.

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To this day, the search for the mine isn't entirely given up ... and the strangest thing about it is this: Scientists claim there couldn't possibly be any gold in the region north of Crow's Nest Lake , where the mine is supposed to be.

So there it is... geography, history, climate, wild life, the settlers who came to the country and the Indians who were already here all played their part in creating western folklore and making it different from the folklore of other places. Mr. Gard considers our folklore unique and interesting enough that he's writing a book about it. He believes more understanding and tolerance will develop between our many different national groups if each has more chance to learn about the traditions and background of the rest. And folklore provides one answer.

By the way, I was telling Mr. Gard that present day Albertans can still invent a good tall tale. Everyone knows what terrific mosquitoes we have here—the old timers had a lot to say about them. Well, last summer a mechanic in Edmonton pumped forty-five gallons of gasoline into a fighter plane, they say—before discovering it was just a mosquito!

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